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The Propaganda War Against East Timor

by Estevão Cabral

ABSTRACT

Since 1974 the Indonesian military regime has made massive use of propaganda in the war against East Timor. The early propaganda campaigns have been well-documented (Taylor 1991; Aarons and Domm 1992 and Barbedo de Magalhães 1992, Sue Rabbitt Roff 1992 and Pilger 1994). Solidarity groups working with the East Timorese Resistance Movement in different parts of the world have built up substantial records of Indonesian propaganda activities and have provided detailed accounts of these in bulletins such as the *Tapol Bulletin*, *Timor Link*, *Timor Leste*, *A Paz é Possível em Timor Leste*, *Network News* and *East Timor Estafeta*. In addition, we now have penetrating analyses of the collusion and cover-up in the North America and Australian media (Chomsky and Herman 1979; Sue Rabbitt Roff 1992; Herman and Chomsky 1994; Gunn 1994 and Pilger 1994). There is also some recent writing on the themes which recur in reports by the official Indonesian press agency *Antara* and in official government documents (Matsuno 1993).

My aim in this paper is to add to this growing body of knowledge about Indonesian propaganda. In the first section, I will do a brief survey of the kind of channels that the Indonesian government and its secret service have used since 1975 to disseminate their version of political and military events. In the second section of this paper, I will look at the themes which recur in official Indonesian discourse about East Timor. Here, I will build on the recent work by Matsuno (1993). In the third section, my focus will shift to specific tactics employed by the Indonesian regime in their current propaganda.

INTRODUCTION

Since 1974 the Indonesian military regime has made massive use of propaganda in the war against East Timor. The early propaganda campaigns have been well-documented (Taylor 1991; Aarons and Domm 1992, Barbedo de Magalhães 1992 and Sue Rabbitt Roff 1992 and Pilger 1994). Solidarity groups working with the East Timorese Resistance Movement in different parts of the world have built up substantial records of Indonesian propaganda activities and have provided detailed accounts of these in bulletins such as the *Tapol Bulletin*, *Timor Link*, *Timor Leste*, *A Paz é Possível em Timor Leste*, *Network News* and *East Timor Estafeta*. In addition, we now have penetrating analyses of the collusion and cover-up in the North America and Australian media (Chomsky and Herman 1979; Sue Rabbitt Roff 1992; Herman and Chomsky 1994; Gunn 1994 and Pilger 1994). There is also some recent writing on the themes which recur in reports by the official Indonesian press agency *Antara* and in official government documents (Matsuno 1993).

My aim in this paper[1] is to add to this growing body of knowledge about Indonesian propaganda. In the first section, I will do a brief survey of the kind of channels that the Indonesian government and its secret service have used since 1975 to disseminate their version of political and military events. In the second section of this paper, I will look at the themes which recur in official Indonesian discourse about East Timor. Here, I will build on the recent work by Matsuno (1993). In the third section, my focus will shift to specific tactics employed by the Indonesian regime in their current propaganda.

[1] I would like to thank the following people for their invaluable help in writing this paper. First, my thanks go to Carmel Budiardjo and Patrick Smythe for giving me copies of newspaper articles and Indonesian government publications which were excellent examples of Indonesian propaganda. Secondly, I am grateful to Greg Myers, Marilyn Martin-Jones, Norman Fairclough and Romy Clark for the challenging comments they gave me on earlier drafts.

THE PROPAGANDA WAR AGAINST EAST TIMOR

Inside East Timor before the Indonesian invasion

The first extensive use of propaganda in the war against East Timor was made by the Indonesian government and its secret service through the operation code-named *Operasi Komodo*[2]. The aim was to destabilise East Timor in the lead up to the first elections to be held in the territory. The Indonesian secret service began by using radio broadcasts. A radio station was set up in West Timor called *Radio Ramelau*[3]. The broadcasters were East Timorese supporters of Indonesian expansionist ambitions. Taylor (1995) reports that BAKIN had already begun training East Timorese radio broadcasters even before the 1974 events in Lisbon[4]. These broadcasts were dominated by grossly misleading propaganda about FRETILIN's political goals and by threats directed at FRETILIN leaders and their supporters.

By using the radio, the Indonesians wanted to reach as wide an audience as possible. However, this kind of propaganda had little or no impact at all. There were two main reasons for this: First, only about 10% of the East Timorese population had a radio at the time. Those who did have access to a radio were already supporters of UDT or FRETILIN and other small political parties. Secondly, the languages spoken during the broadcasts were Tetum and Portuguese. Tetum is a lingua franca which is now widely used among the East Timorese but the proportion of the East Timorese population who spoke Tetum at that time was under 50% while only 15 to 20% (including those pupils who were at primary school) spoke Portuguese. Moreover, political terminology had still not been developed in Tetum, so Portuguese terms had to be used to express certain meanings such as, 'independence', 'democracy', 'liberty'. This meant that not everything was understood by the people the propaganda was targeting.

The Indonesian secret service also distributed leaflets. Again, the main target was FRETILIN. Some leaflets represented the FRETILIN 'threat' in a dramatic image of a hand with long nails alongside a hammer and sickle. The purpose was to evoke an image which would be

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[2] Operation Giant Lizard.
[3] Named after the highest mountain in East Timor.
[4] Taylor (1995:24).

disturbing to the small but powerful Catholic minority in East Timor. The idea was to portray FRETILIN as a Communist 'devil'. However again, in this case, the propaganda strategy misfired. The Indonesian agents seem to have forgotten two things: Firstly, the image of a hand with long nails, the image of a devil, did not affect many ordinary East Timorese because in the mid-1970s, most East Timorese were still Animists. Those who were Catholic were already members of FRETILIN or one of the other political parties. The main reason why people were supporting FRETILIN was because it was fighting for independence. Independence was the main objective not the spread of Communism. Secondly, the hammer and sickle would have no meaning at all as the vast majority of East Timorese did not now what this symbol stood for. They knew nothing about Communism.

Before and after the invasion in Indonesia: misinformation and censorship

BAKIN and certain elements of the Indonesian military were also planting articles in the Indonesian press in the lead up to the invasion of East Timor. The purpose was to impose a definition of events in East Timor which would eventually justify a full scale invasion. One newspaper, in particular, called *Berita Yudha* served as a mouthpiece for the military. According to Taylor (1995) an article published in this newspaper in August 1975 made a deliberately false claim about ASDT/FRETILIN 'seeking Communist support'[5].

The conflicts created as a result of the covert cross-border incursions by the Indonesian military and the activities of the Operasi Komodo were represented in the Indonesian Press as evidence of increasing political turmoil and upheaval in East Timor. False reports were also made about FRETILIN. Taylor (1991) points out that *Antara*, the Indonesian Press Agency, reported in September 1975 that FRETILIN forces had killed seven villagers in West Timor in a cross-border attack. No such cross-border incursion had in fact taken place. However, this report caused considerable anger and apprehension in West Timor and in Indonesia and contributed to the image of FRETILIN as a threat to the security of the Indonesia as a nation.

[5] Taylor (1995:26).

Antara and some daily newspapers such as *Sinar Harapan* also made regular reports about 'military successes' by UDT and APODETI[6].

The Indonesian media were heavily censored before, during and after the invasion. Therefore, it was very difficult for ordinary Indonesians to get any accurate information about the situation. Still today, the average Indonesian citizen is very ill-informed about the recent history of East Timor. There have been attempts to address the East Timor issue in the Indonesian media but the government reaction to this has been very heavy handed.

Over twenty years later: Indonesian propaganda and censorship in the 1990s

The Indonesian propaganda machine has operated in different ways during the twenty one years since the illegal occupation of East Timor. In this section, I will describe some of the current ways in which the Indonesian military regime disseminates its version of events and I will identity some of the channels it uses.

Using official sources of information

The Indonesian government line on East Timor is most obviously reported through official sources such as *Antara,* the government news agency, Foreign Ministry pamphlets and through official newsletters disseminated through local embassies (see the Appendix for details of these).

Planting articles in the South East Asian and Western press

In addition, articles are regularly planted in the South East Asian and Western press by Indonesian government officials or embassy staff. For example, one member of the London embassy staff, Dino Patti Djalal, often sends in pieces to the Jakarta Post, an English language daily produced in Jakarta. However, when these pieces are published, no mention is made of the fact that he is an Indonesian government representative. In contrast, a member of staff from the Indonesian Department of Foreign Affairs, Irawan Abidin, placed his own signed

[6] Taylor (1991:59).

articles in the press. Take, for instance, the article from the 5th Column of the *Far Eastern Economic Review* (FEER) which I will mention again later in this paper. This was written by Irawan Abidin, the Director of Foreign Information. Before this, Abidin had also written an article accusing Amnesty International of "waging a political campaign" against Indonesia[7].

Another approach the Indonesians have adopted is to encourage journalists, former diplomats, politicians, members of the clergy to write articles for newspapers and magazines presenting an Indonesian point of view. The encouragement offered to such apologists for the regime sometimes takes the form of an invitation to visit Indonesia (and possibly East Timor) with all expenses paid. People who have recently received this kind of encouragement include Patrick Nicholls, the British Conservative politician and Thomas Michel, a prominent Jesuit and Secretary to the Conference of Asian Bishops in Thailand. Former diplomats have also written articles in the press which clearly echo the usual Indonesian account of the situation in East Timor. These include Gough Whitlam, the Australian former Prime Minister[8], Edward Masters, former US Ambassador to Indonesia[9] and Billveer Singh a Singaporean academic[10].

Creating media events

More recently, the Indonesian authorities have taken to staging media events, often using television as a medium. The most striking example of this kind of orchestration of the media came with the arrest of Xanana Gusmão. A week after his arrest, an 'interview' with him was staged on Indonesian television, (with Abílio Osório, the Indonesian appointed governor of East Timor, as interpreter) in which Xanana appeared to be 'renouncing' the struggle. The Indonesian government also tried to make a lot of mileage out of the coverage of Xanana's 'trial'.

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[7] Abidin, I. in Indonesian News (November 1994:2).
[8] Whitlam has written in the Sydney Morning Herald. (See Pilger 1994:249).
[9] Masters has written in the Asian Wall Street Journal (See Appendix A).
[10] He has written a book entitled: East Timor, Indonesia and the World: Myths and Realities.

Using East Timorese voices

The most recent development has been the use of a small number of East Timorese people to make public statements sympathetic to the Indonesian position on East Timor. One example of this is the statement made by Paulino Gama at the UN Sub-Commission on Human Rights in Vienna in June 1993[11]. Since then, someone has been brought to the Geneva meeting every year by the Indonesian regime to counter statements made by members of the East Timorese Resistance.

Silencing of voices of opposition within Indonesia

Today, there are a few people in Indonesia who are willing to speak out since there are huge risks involved. Those who do speak out are harassed and threatened. Some Indonesian academics like George Aditjondro have consistently contested the official Indonesian government line on East Timor[12]. Indonesian journalists have few opportunities to report accurately on the situation in East Timor because of the heavy censorship. The press has been under strong attack in Indonesia recently. Three major main newspapers and news magazine have recently been closed down. These are *Tempo*, *De Tik* and *Editor*.

RECURRING THEMES IN INDONESIAN PROPAGANDA

In a recent article, Matsuno (1993) has provided a penetrating analysis of Indonesian propaganda about East Timor. He identifies four recurring themes in this propaganda:

- Communist-phobia (which continues even today)
- Paternalism and an attitude of: "They don't know what they do"
- Insistence on 'development' rather than self-determination
- Preoccupation with the 'disintegration' of Indonesia

Matsuno has shown how these themes have been articulated in different types of political texts in Indonesia. He has also noted that they also get taken up in the Western Press. There is

[11] See my response to this statement in Cabral 1993.

[12] Aditjondro has written several papers on East Timor challenging the Indonesian government's claim over the territory (see, for example, Aditjondro 1995).

one other common theme of the Indonesian propaganda which needed to be added to those already identified by Matsuno and that is: Obsession with 'foreign' intervention. I will discuss all five of these themes below.

Communist-phobia

As I showed in the second section of this paper, Communist-phobia was a central theme in the BAKIN-organised propaganda inside East Timor in the 1974-1975 period, particularly in radio broadcasts and leaflets. This phobia still surfaces in the Indonesian media and in official government discourse today: all those opposed to the Indonesian presence in East Timor are seen as FRETILIN, and therefore as 'Communist revolutionaries' and a threat to the existing political order. Xanana Gusmão is still identified with FRETILIN even though he left FRETILIN in 1986. He is still referred to by the Indonesians, and by many foreign journalists, as the FRETILIN leader and not as the leader of the National Resistance Movement (CNRM). Linking Xanana with FRETILIN serves as a powerful propaganda tactic because, as, Matsuno (1993) points out, in this way, the Indonesian government is trying "to conceal the development of East Timorese nationalism, and the fact that the leadership of the Resistance is no longer a political party but an umbrella organisation"[13].

Paternalism

Matsuno (1993) points out that in Indonesian media reports, East Timor is often referred to as the 'youngest-child' province (*propinsi bungsu*) or the 'youngest' province (*propinsi termuda*) of Indonesia. The implication of this family metaphor is that the government in Jakarta is the adult or parent who has the main responsibility for it. This paternalistic discourse is particularly evident in media treatment of the young people involved in the Resistance inside East Timor. Take, for example, an article cited by Matsuno (1993) which appeared in the Indonesian news magazine *Tempo* on November 30, 1990. In this article, the young people who risked their lives in a peaceful demonstration against Indonesian rule just before the Santa Cruz massacre of November 1990 are described as "*easily mobilised*" and as "*bravely*

[13] Matsuno (1993:4).

expressing what has become troubles in their thoughts". The journalist then claimed that the troubled "*thoughts*" of the young people were due to the influence of "*former activists*" and "*foreign radio broadcasts which tend to be anti-integration*".

'Development' rather than self-determination

In the discourse of the Indonesian regime, the idea of self-determination is out of the question. Again and again, the officials of the Indonesian regime argue that the East Timorese are at last enjoying some 'development'. They claim that, under Portuguese colonial rule East Timor was underdeveloped. The Indonesians argue that self-determination is not viable. They appeal to the international community using 'statistics' and ask people to look at the 'development' that the Indonesian government is responsible for. This is a common theme in pieces written by outside 'observers' such as Thomas Michel and Edward Masters (See Appendix).

The 'disintegration' of Indonesia

Another recurring theme in Indonesian nationalist discourse is that the invasion of East Timor involved the 'return' of the territory to a wider community with shared cultural and linguistic identity. In official government discourse, there are references to myths about a pre-colonial empire which united all the islands in the so-called *Nusantara* archipelago. The great 'project' of the Indonesian Republic is seen as the 'reunification' of the archipelago and thus, any opposition to 'integration' is seen as a direct threat to the Indonesian nation.

As Matsuno (1993) notes:

> The 'integration' rhetoric is produced and consumed, consciously or unconsciously, through government documents and mass media, by Indonesians and non-Indonesians. At the bottom of the rhetoric lies a grammar which enables those who share it to understand what is meant and implied. Ultimately this amounts to a shared illusion. But this illusion is powerful and indeed had become an obsession in Indonesian elite thought[14].

[14] Matsuno (1993:1).

Obsession with 'foreign propaganda' and 'interference'

The word 'foreign' in Indonesian official discourse means anyone who is not Indonesian or East Timorese. This includes the Portuguese government (still recognised by the UN as the administering power on East Timor). It also includes other governments and international bodies such as the UN. But, the main preoccupation in Indonesian political discourse is with 'interference' in the affairs of East Timor, by Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and solidarity groups working with the East Timor Resistance Front. Some of these groups and even individuals, have been singled out for repeated propaganda attacks (see list of articles in the Appendix).

PROPAGANDA TACTICS CURRENTLY USED BY THE INDONESIAN REGIME

Attacking individual East Timorese leaders

A common propaganda strategy has been to launch attacks against individual leaders, such as Xanana Gusmão and José Ramos Horta, the Spokesperson of the CNRM so as to undermine their authority and credibility. I will mention just three examples of this: (1) A few weeks after Xanana Gusmão's capture on November 20, 1992, the Indonesian newspaper which is controlled by the military ran an article on him which was a poorly disguised attempt at character assassination. In the article, Xanana was accused of raping a young woman and killing innocent people. The article went on to say that he was threatening the family where he was hiding before he was arrested. However, some months later, a letter from East Timorese women entitled "Timorese Women Cry for Help", provided evidence that the newspaper's allegations were pure fabrication and that the young woman was raped by Indonesian soldiers. (2) The second example was an article about Xanana Gusmão, the leader of the Resistance Movement, which appeared in the 5th Column of the FEER in August 1995. As I indicated earlier, it was written by Irawan Abidin, from the Indonesian Department of Foreign Affairs. (3) The third example arose recently with the award of the Nobel Peace Prize to Bishop Belo and to José Ramos Horta. Very soon after the announcement of the award, Horta was described by Ali Alatas, the Indonesian Foreign Minister as a "political adventurist". This remark was followed by a number of other slurs on his character and his political work.

In addition to these attacks on the character and reputation of East Timorese leaders, the Indonesian regime also tries to undermine their authority by misrepresenting what they say or write. The article Abidin in the FEER about Xanana Gusmão went even further and denied altogether the authenticity of letters and audio-tapes sent out of prison by Xanana since his arrest in November 1992.

Misrepresentation, Lies and Distortion

Since 1975, the Indonesian propaganda machine has continued to produce distorted versions of political and military events in East Timor. It is sometimes remarkable to see to what lengths they are prepared to go in constructing a propaganda line. The tactics vary from complete absence of mention and recasting of terms used by the East Timorese Resistance to total misrepresentation.

The Indonesian government is also preoccupied with the numbers games. They refute and/or distort the numbers of people killed during and after invasion of 1975 (this distortion recurs in several of the sources listed in the Appendix). Official Indonesian publications also produce statistics about the 'facts' of 'development' in East Timor since the Indonesian take-over: the most common statistics are about how many roads have been built, how many schools and hospitals and so on. These statistics are then taken up by people who support the regime outside (see articles by Thomas Michel and Edward Masters in the Appendix).

THE PROPAGANDA WAR AGAINST EAST TIMOR: STRATEGIES OF RESISTANCE

As we build strategies of resistance to the Indonesian propaganda war against East Timor, we need to develop a firm understanding of where and how it operates. In this paper, I focused first on the channels that have been used by the Indonesian regime for disseminating its version of political and military events in East Timor. I then looked at the themes which have emerged in this propaganda and the tactics that have been used, particularly in recent propaganda material.

Those of us who are campaigning for an independent East Timor need access to more channels to disseminate our version of events and to express our political goals. But we also need to be fully aware of the ways in which the Indonesians are using the channels they have access to. We will be more effective in countering their propaganda if we can anticipate the moves they are likely to make.

As we have seen over the years, the Indonesian military regime has used its propaganda machine to undermine political parties, solidarity groups, media and individuals sympathetic to the cause of East Timor. We must also bear in mind the possibility that if this regime stays in power, it will continue to wage similar campaigns in the future, after independence. As they have done in the past, the Indonesian Intelligence Services are still capable of infiltrating East Timor to stir up or manufacture problems within our country and to create tensions and unrest. We must therefore be prepared for the worst. They may well be looking for an excuse to re-invade East Timor. The current malicious propaganda line which says: "if the Indonesians pull out, there will be another Bosnia in East Timor" is a rather revealing. There is no smoke without fire and we need to be on our guard.

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APPENDIX

EXAMPLES OF RECENT PIECES OF PROPAGANDA

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